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English 202B

### Karma: Real or Fake? Good or Bad?

#### Cause and Effect, or Something More?

“Cause & effect” is one of the first concepts that humans—and likely many other lifeforms—learn and come to understand at an early age. Scratching my 9-year-old North American shorthair tabby, Nala, in just the right spot of her cotton-soft coat causes her to purr; making a silly face at my niece, Arya, makes her laugh. No magic needed. The question is, does killing a tiny, innocent ladybug or cutting someone off in traffic cause some otherworldly force to activate, changing the future for you (and thus everyone around you) in order to reprimand you for your sin?

#### My Encounter with Karma

Karma is the purest form of the mysterious ethereal force represented in many different cultures, religions, beliefs, and languages. It appears in religions from Hinduism to Judaism, in Greek and Roman stories, in philosophical theories, and even in modern culture like Santa’s ‘Naughty or Nice’ Christmas lists.

I often wonder if I’ve reaped everything that I’ve sowed in my life. My partially torn meniscus I sustained on the last play of the last scrimmage of my 9th grade football season days before the first game surely must have been a consequence of some foolish decision that I made that summer. I wonder if the recovery process, which was likely prolonged due to my stubbornness, was a calculated result of one significant action or an accumulation of many small ones. The X-rays, the CAT scan, the grueling physical therapy, the uncertainty, the knee brace that was

definitely too tight for my leg. What could constitute such torture (to the mind of a 15-year-old high school athlete)? There must be some inexplicable, immeasurable entity at hand.

## Karma Culturally

Karma is nothing new to the world. It's a constant theme in many movies, novels, music, and cultures in general. I can name five songs from just the last few years with the word "karma" in the title. From my experience, however, it appears to be more of a cliché in America than anything else. Exploring the many different interpretations of karma across cultures would be the best approach to take in broadening my understanding of how the world views and interacts with the phenomenon.

South Asian religions have the most complex and intricate versions of how karma works.

According to Britannica.com, The concept was first mentioned almost 3,000 years ago in the Hindu literature known as the Upaniṣads, which acted as the foundation of Hinduism. Hinduism and Buddhism organize karma into three categories: past, present, and future lifetimes. For Hinduism, one's spirit lives an infinite number of lifetimes until it fully identifies with and unites with the Hindu God known as Brahman. Past karmic debt affects the current lifetime as well as potential future lifetimes, which essentially means you enter the world with an irreversible karmic mix of past and present that can only be fully distinguished by reaching "liberation."

Buddhism thoroughly explains how karma is earned. According to BuddhaNet.com, involuntary, unintentional, and unconscious actions have no effect on one's karma--only intentional mental, verbal, or physical ones. Previous karma can be weakened and even diluted by good actions, and both the karmic cycle and rebirth end once the being reaches "Nirvana."

As a non-denominational Christian, these religions broaden my view of life and how other religions go about making it more comprehensive. Despite the famous “you reap what you sow” saying found in the Holy Bible, Christianity rejects all notions of karma’s existence.

Reincarnation isn’t recognized and God does not punish those who sin. One can argue that the closest semblance to Christian karma can be found in God’s decision to send those who’ve passed to either Heaven or Hell based on their repentance and devotion in life.

Fortunately, this isn’t a contest on what religion can create the fairest karmic system for humans to live by. Religion is passed down for generations and serves as a guideline for billions on how to best navigate life. Many family members of mine have found their purpose in religion, remaining devout believers through their best and worst times. According to Pew Research Center, over 75% of the world is religious; that’s 6 *billion* people practicing some sort of religion, of which many have some semblance of a karmic formula that explains many of life’s unexplainable occurrences. It’s safe to say that religion is a safe explanation for the majority of karma-believers out there, which doesn’t even account for the non-religious who are instead spiritual.

## Karma in World History

For the non-religious and non-spiritual, there are plenty of instances in world history that seem to hint at some sort of karma. Maximilien Robespierre was responsible for almost 30,000 deaths of those accused of opposing the French Revolution, most of which were executions, during the French Revolution. He blew his jaw off during a failed suicide attempt and was executed via guillotine as his untreated injury caused him to scream in pain. Napoleon Bonaparte’s attempt at conquering Europe ended with his exile to a remote island where he died of a stomach ulcer.

Hitler's fate is self-explanatory, but, according to the National WWII Museum, his soldiers fought to their deaths long after the war ended due to fear of their own karma.

Did the innocent citizens of Germany deserve to be affected by the collective karma Germany experienced post-WWII? Most would agree that they didn't. Plane crashes, natural disasters, and other horrific events are often unexplainable. These "wrong place, wrong time" instances directly contradict karma's existence, or at the very least, its consistency. A strict karmic force would never allow for there to be a "wrong" place or time. With how indiscriminate tragedies often are, it's clear that either the South Asian religions are closer to the truth, or karma is simply not as all-powerful as many deem it to be.

### The Ethics of Karma

As someone who loosely believes in some form of karma, I imagine there must be those out there who believe in stricter forms of it. Life isn't fair, and outside of its inequities and inequalities, many people (me included) appear to have much worse luck than probability should allow. From a psychological standpoint, such beliefs can cause anxiety and paranoia, especially for those trying to constantly 'balance' their karma. It's also likely that there are those who attempt to sustain a sort of balancing act, canceling out bad deeds with good ones and hoping it evens out. While living a karma-led life can lead to a selfless life, having one's karma in mind while carrying out these deeds feels paradoxical. These issues with karma's flawed concept not only support poor or unethical behavior but also add to the substantial evidence against karma's existence.

## An overview of Karma

As a young adult who is more susceptible to poor decisions than I would like to be, I'm not sure if my karma has been distributed, evened out, or even exists. Maybe it's waiting for the least expected moment to unleash itself. Perhaps it's completely unpredictable; a mindless, lottery number fluttering in a glass ball that may not fall until my latter days or even my next lifetime. Regardless of what fate has planned for me, I believe the only way to make any sensible formula of how karma actually works would be to combine several different religions' explanations, ensuring that its shortcomings are accounted for. Of course, that creates ethical problems of its own. Regardless, whether you believe in karma or not, there's no question that it's one of the more hopeful attitudes to have while traversing the maze of life.

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